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National Council of Welfare.

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[General Publications]

poor people's groups

a report of the
national council of welfare seminar
on self-help problem solving
by low-income communities



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INTRODUCTION

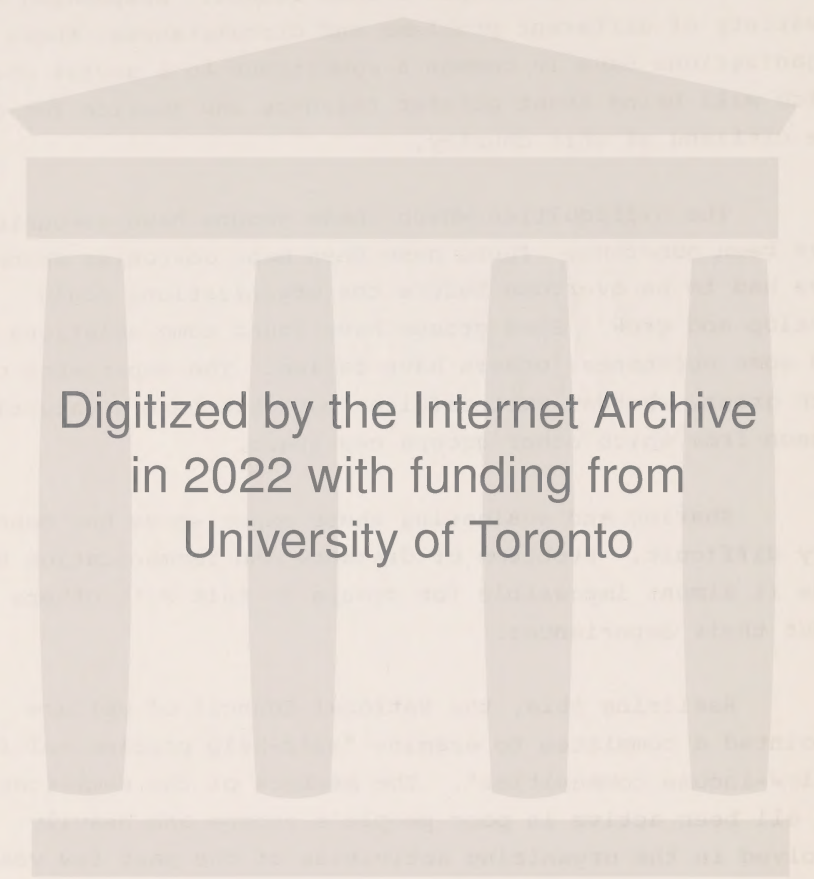
In the past few years a great number of low-income organizations have developed across Canada. Responding to a variety of different problems and circumstances, these organizations have in common a commitment to a social change which will bring about greater fairness and justice for all the citizens of this country.

The difficulties which these groups have encountered have been numerous. There have been many obstacles which have had to be overcome before the organizations could develop and grow. Some groups have found some solutions and had some successes; others have failed. The experience of each group, whether successful or not, has been a valuable lesson from which other groups can learn.

Sharing and evaluating these experiences has been very difficult. Problems of distance and communication have made it almost impossible for groups to talk with others about their experiences.

Realizing this, the National Council of Welfare appointed a committee to examine "self-help problem solving by low-income communities". The members of the committee had all been active in poor people's groups and heavily involved in the organizing activities of the past few years.

In order to expand the range of relevant experience within the group, the committee invited others who had also been deeply involved in the process in other parts of Canada to participate in a four-day seminar. This seminar was held in Smiths Falls, Ontario, October 19 - 22, 1972, involving



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fourteen participants representing a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. Some came from towns and rural areas, others from medium-sized and large cities. Each of Canada's five regions was represented. Some participants had been involved in umbrella organizations that spanned cities or provinces; others were from local groups. Some were from groups that have been particularly successful; others from groups that have not. Most of the participants were from groups primarily involved in welfare rights, but some were from groups that had branched out into various other activities.

In preparation for the seminar, each participant was asked to prepare a brief historical outline of the development of his own group. These reports may be found in the separate volume: Background Papers for the National Council of Welfare Seminar on Self-Help Problem Solving by Low-Income Communities.

The seminar itself dealt with general questions that affected all the groups. These questions were divided into two broad categories. The first was Participation and Leadership; the second, Services and Social Action. Each of these categories was divided into a number of sub-sections. A series of specific questions was asked in each sub-section to focus the discussion. These were:

Participation and Leadership

Membership:

How can membership be expanded? Is there a value to numbers in itself? Can the group really involve large numbers and what does "involve" actually mean?

Participation and Decision-Making:

How do decisions get made? By whom? What is the responsibility of elected leaders to make decisions? When should the whole group be involved? What are alternative organizational structures?

Relationship of Leaders to Members:

Does becoming a leader make a person "different"? How great a problem is this? How can it be dealt with? What are the results of personality conflicts on the group?

Leadership Development:

What kind of skills should a leader have? How might these skills be developed? Would training programmes be helpful? How could these be provided?

Relationship of the Group to Resource People:

What use can the group make of general community resources to help them find answers to deal with problems? What is the role of specialized resource people? What should be their relationship to the group?

Effects of Funding:

What effects has funding had in providing services and building organization? What problems does funding create within the group? How much is a group's original purpose affected when it receives funds?

Services and Social Action

The Group and Services:

Are there needs which have to be met through services offered by groups? How far do groups go in meeting that need? How far could they go? Do services play indirect roles in the group such as being an organizing tool, building membership, identifying issues, etc.? Does social action get lost when a group concentrates on services? Are services themselves a form of social action or do they only make existing structures work somewhat better?

The Group and the Social Service System:

What should be the relationship of the group's activities to the social service system? When should a group become involved with private or public social service agencies?

The Group and Social Change:

What forms of social action might groups use? What kinds of tactics are effective in what situations? What works where? What kinds of relationships should a group have to the political process?

The Group and Other Groups:

How broad or narrow a range of issues should a group involve itself with? What sorts of relationships with other groups are helpful?

The report which follows is a summary of the conclusions which were reached by the participants at the seminar. It is the collective product of four days of comparing and evaluating fourteen sets of different experiences in relation to this series of common questions.

PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

In any group there are two key aspects which demand careful examination. The first is what the group does - the objective which it has set for itself. The second is the way in which it organizes itself to get that job done.

A great deal of attention has been given to the first. This is only natural since the concept of poor people's groups is a relatively new one and there has been a real need to define the area of greatest effectiveness. The experience of groups across Canada, however, has dramatically pointed out the need to give the same attention to the internal organization of the group. A group has to be structured in a way that will enable it to get its job done. It has to have access to the resources that can help it get its job done in the way it wants it to be done. And a group has to have the capacity for self-evaluation so it can identify its strengths and weaknesses, its successes and its problems.

In beginning to examine groups, therefore, it makes sense to first look at the internal organization of the group. Six major elements were identified and discussed at length under the heading of "Participation and Leadership".

1. Membership

In any group there are three categories of members:

First, there are the mailing-list members. These are the people who call themselves members but who do very little for the group. They provide the numbers when the group needs to show it has broad support. Occasionally they attend meetings or take part in actions, but they generally do little active work for the group.

Second, there are the actively-involved. These are the people who will come out for an action or will do volunteer work for the group if they are asked. They provide the back-up manpower needed at critical times.

Third, there are the committed workers. These are the ones who keep the group functioning from day-to-day. They regularly come to the office and can be counted upon without being asked. They take on the unglamorous, sometimes dull, jobs that have to be done. They really make the group work because they are dependable, because they have made a real commitment to the group, and because they are prepared to carry out that commitment.

Any realistic examination of membership in a group should begin with the recognition that the mailing-list members will be the most numerous while the committed workers will be the least numerous. This is not necessarily a problem nor is it a sign of weakness in a group. It is simply a reality which any group must accept.

Too often the question of membership becomes a pointless numbers-game played in response to outside inquiries or pressures. Groups become so concerned about how many members they can claim that they ignore the simple fact that a large, uninvolved, unmotivated membership is a scant asset. The emphasis should not be put on numbers for their own sake, but on how many members are willing to work actively in, and for, the group. The real need is for the group to continually gain more committed workers.

This is not to say there is no value in numbers. Clearly, a large membership indicates a strong supportive body that the group could potentially rally behind its actions; this is often useful to impress or to pressure for change. The impact of certain types of social action can be dependent upon the number of members which the group can bring together; a group can be strong in this type of action when it has numbers behind it. However, a group should not spend all of its time and energy trying to create a large membership while ignoring the more essential question of how it can actively involve its membership.

The task which the group should take on is how to make its mailing-list members into committed workers and how to bring in new members and make them want to become committed workers. The group that is prepared to honestly take on this task - and it is not an easy one - will be well on its way to solving the "membership problem". It is this task, and not the numbers-game, which will make or break a group.

From the collective experience of several groups across Canada some suggestions on how to do this emerge:

- (a) It is essential to maintain drawing-cards or attractions for new members. Often these take the form of the services which the group offers; these services can cover the range from clothing depots to advocacy. There is a real danger, however, that these services can easily take over a group and divert it from its other objectives. There are several examples where the drawing-card became the group's primary activity. The value of services as a drawing-card must be acknowledged, but the danger should be kept constantly in mind and guarded against.
- (b) After someone has had initial contact with a group, the group should offer a varied enough programme to interest that person. The group should be ready to take different skills, talents, and interests and to find a way of letting the individual apply these in the group. The group's programme should be adequately varied without being so spread-out that it has lost sight of its purposes.

New members must be given the opportunity to develop their own roles. The group should realize that new members will come to the group to satisfy needs that may be different from those of older members. What may seem like important and satisfying work to someone who has been in the group for a while could turn-off someone new

to the group. Considerable care must be taken not to dump a great many tasks on a new person. A sure way to kill anyone's enthusiasm is to pile job on job until participation in a group becomes a drudgery.

Experienced members should show patience with new members and take time to answer their questions. Everyone in the group should remember that he or she was also a new member once.

- (c) A group should not promise its members what it cannot deliver. A group has to be realistic; it has to know its own limitations as well as its own potential. It cannot build up false hopes and expectations that can only lead to disappointments. A group has to guard against spreading itself too thin. It has to know how far its manpower will go.

A group going after an increase in welfare allowances, for example, should not tell its members that by participating in an action they will automatically get a raise. The group may be confident that it can get an increase, but it cannot be certain; the situation should always be realistically described to the members. Using the same example, the group may be able to get an increase in one part of the grant (say, an increase in the housing allowance) although it might not be able to get a general increase; again, the group has to be realistic in what it is, and is and is not, able to do.

- (d) A group has to keep opportunities for advancement open to all the members. It has to be possible for the mailing-list members to become actively involved and to assume leadership positions in the group. Leadership cannot become a closed domain which is the permanent prerogative of a few.

Several methods have been developed to open opportunities for advancement. None of these methods is better than the others because they each respond to a particular local situation faced by a group. However, they illustrate some of the creative approaches which groups can use.

In one city, for example, advancement is made possible through the variety of different organizations that have come together to form a city-wide umbrella organization. Most new members come in through relatively low-key social- and service-oriented groups. New people can move easily into leadership roles in these groups because leadership is not very demanding. Those who want to become more involved in a more active way can move naturally to other issue- and action-oriented groups within the same umbrella. In a sense, these are the "graduate organizations" that individuals can move into when they are ready.

In another city, a group has set up and runs training programmes in welfare rights so new members can be given the background they need to participate. The group also has a number of

committees, most of which are short-term, which can appeal to a wide variety of interests and which are open to all the members. As members' involvement and interest grow, they can move through different committees. The committees also provide opportunities for new people to assume leadership roles.

- (e) The group has to develop a steady stream of new people who can step into any position that becomes open. It is to be expected that as some people become involved in the group they will acquire marketable skills and leave the group to take salaried positions elsewhere. This is another reality which the group should be prepared to accept. But it is crucial that when this happens the group has someone else who can move into the position so the work does not stop.
- (f) The social dimension of the group should not be forgotten. Perhaps group meetings could be divided between the work-sessions and an informal social gathering; this could help to build a greater sense of belonging to the group which would lead the way to deeper involvement. There are undoubtedly many other possibilities that a group could try: Christmas parties, exchanges with other groups, etc.

2. Participation and Decision Making

There is probably no group that has not gone through an internal crisis over a decision which one person, or a handful of people, made on behalf of the whole group. Who should make what decisions when? This is a hard question which every group has to face. Its success at arriving at an acceptable answer which is suited to its own circumstances may well determine its ability to function as a group.

In most groups the ideal of "participatory democracy" is put forward. It is clear, however, that everyone cannot be involved in each decision. There is an overwhelming need for leaders who must play a key role in the decision-making process. The question of decision-making becomes how to find the right balance between total-membership participation and total decision-making by leaders. Again there is no one solution that can apply to every group, but there are some general principles that seem to be broadly valid.

Among these general principles, one stands out: The responsibility of the leaders is to be prepared and willing to make the decisions; the responsibility of the group is to choose their leaders wisely and then accept the consequences of their decisions.

This is a very sweeping statement which requires considerable explanation. It is certainly not meant that all decisions should be made by the leaders. Quite to the contrary, leaders cannot solve all the problems of a group; they have to be able to identify those problems that only the whole group

can solve and they must take these problems back to the group. Any group that permits all decision-making to become the prerogative of the leaders must be seriously weak; only an uninvolved or disinterested membership would allow this to happen. However, there are a great number of on-going operating decisions that have to be made if the group is to function from day-to-day; these must be made by the leaders or the group will never work. Also, groups sometimes have to respond quickly to crisis situations; the need for rapid decision-making can make it impractical to involve the whole group and the leaders must be prepared to make a decision on behalf of the group.

If the members find the decisions made by their leaders unacceptable, they have the responsibility of electing new leaders. Obviously there is an underlying assumption that the group is democratically organized so members can express dissatisfaction by replacing their leaders. Even if this is the case, it is hardly an option which a group should resort to frequently. Leaders must be carefully and wisely selected in the first place.

The membership must decide the general directions which the group will follow; they must set broad, flexible guidelines within which the leaders must work. All major decisions that commit the group to significant action or new directions should be taken back to the whole membership. But again the key is flexibility: some major decisions have to be made quickly and it may not be possible to consult the whole group. In these cases the leaders have to lead.

Groups can avoid many problems by providing their leaders with clear job descriptions. These job descriptions should be reviewed periodically to insure that they are still relevant to the group's needs. After the job description has been agreed upon, the leaders must have the power to carry out their job; and they must be prepared to take on the responsibility involved with the job.

For the most part, detail decisions should be left up to the leaders; this is particularly true of operating details which generally are of very little interest to the broad membership. However, the group has to define which decisions are to be considered "details" and left up to the leaders. When the definition is made, the leaders must be allowed to carry it out.

The leaders have a responsibility of keeping members informed of the decisions they make and of using the members' reactions as a barometer to test the acceptability of their decisions. Good communications between leaders and members is crucial. When communications break down members can often feel that the group is no longer theirs, but belongs to the leaders; members can drop away as they stop feeling part of the group. The leaders must guard against this by keeping communications open.

Beyond these general principles there is no one organizational structure which can work everywhere. Indeed, there is an unlimited number of alternative structures which respond to different specific local needs and circumstances. Groups should be prepared to experiment until they find the organizational structure that is right for them. They should avoid adopting a formal, detailed constitution just for the

sake of having one before they really know what they want and need.

All the viable organizational structures, however, have one theme in common: leadership is necessary. It is very clear that the "no-leader, collective-decision" model which some groups have tried simply cannot work. No group can be effective when everyone must be involved in every decision. Irrespective of the specific structure there must be leaders who have the responsibility for making certain kinds of decisions. Whether the organization chart is drawn to look like a regular triangle or an upside-down triangle, a circle or a square there will still be a need for leaders elected to perform certain tasks and the same practical questions will remain as to what decisions are to be delegated to these leaders so they can do their jobs.

Finally, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that when the term "leader" is used it means citizen or indigenous leader. It does not refer to professionals who have assumed decision-making roles within a group. Although this point will be discussed at greater length later, it must be stated that professionals should have no part as leaders of a group; although professionals have a valid and important role, leadership is not it.

3. Relationship of Leaders to Members

Becoming a leader can bring some unexpected consequences in the individual's relation to the rest of the group. In the eyes of new members, and perhaps even some of the old ones, the leader suddenly becomes the "indigenous professional": a person who can be blamed for every decision and action that someone does not like, a person who should have all the answers

and who should not make any mistakes. After receiving the approval and confidence of the group through election to a leadership position, the leader can become the object of shot-gun criticism from all sides whenever anything seems to be going wrong.

Directed and constructive criticism has an important role to play in the group; but random criticism that blames every problem on the leader can accomplish little. If all the criticism directed at the leaders is justified, then the quality of leadership must be inadequate and the group should elect new leaders. But usually this is not the case; leaders just make easy targets, whether they deserve it or not. Needless to say, this makes the job of a leader much more difficult than it already is.

Groups should be careful in the way they delegate power and they must accept the responsibility for the results. When a leader is not performing his job properly, they should be ready to do something about it. When a leader is doing an adequate job, they should be constructive in their criticism and supportive of him. The group should remember that the leader has no special gifts and is learning to do his job by trying his best and learning from his mistakes. Everyone in the group has a crucial role in helping him. The leader should be prepared to accept that some members will view him as "different". No matter what the leader does, some will look at him as "the person up-there". The whole group should be aware when this begins to happen and should be prepared to help the leader correct the situation. On his own part, the leader should be open to constructive criticism and prepared to admit to mistakes honestly made.

Leaders should remember that because of their contacts and the experiences gained through leadership they may see things differently from members. The leaders must always keep in mind where the members are at. They must be ready to continually adjust themselves to the members.

Some groups have pushed certain members into accepting a leadership position before they were really ready. This can have very negative consequences. Family and personal lives have been affected and good workers have been lost to the community. Groups should not lose good workers and potential leaders by pushing them prematurely to accept leadership roles.

Some of the problems in the relationship of leaders to members can be traced to personality conflicts. These are unavoidable; they can be found in any group and generally cause few major problems. However, when a personality conflict gets to the point where it is damaging to the group as a whole, it must be dealt with honestly and openly. A group cannot allow these conflicts to grow until permanent damage to the organization is caused; however unpleasant the job, they have to be dealt with.

One method of preventing conflict from getting out of hand is an established and continual process of evaluation where the group sits down to look at itself as a group. No situation should be allowed to continue without being examined periodically. Even if there are no apparent problems, there is still a value to self-examination by the group. Evaluation periods should be made a regular part of the group's programme;

it has been suggested that quarterly evaluations are not too frequent. These should be formal, structured evaluations when the group examines its method of operating, the job of its leaders, etc. In addition, there should be an on-going, more informal evaluation that can serve as a constant safeguard against situations becoming crises.

One of the most extreme dangers which evaluation can help to prevent is the "power-tripper". The power-tripper can be the person who gets into a position of influence and who begins to take over all the decision-making powers to himself. He makes decisions that are to his own advantage and not the group's. Soon other members of the group are faced with the alternatives of leaving the group, following his lead, or staging an often bitter struggle to oust him. Sometimes a power-tripper can hang on and command public attention even when everyone else has left the group and he is the only one left. The no-members-one-power-tripper group is not an unknown thing.

The media can play a large part in creating a power-tripper when they elevate someone as spokesman for the group and focus public attention on him. Sometimes such a person has no real power within the group, but great influence over the public's impression of the group because the press keeps turning to him as spokesman. In other cases it may be the group which creates its own power-tripper by feeding his ego through telling him he is the only person who can do many of the important things required by the group.

Power-trippers are one of the greatest dangers facing groups that do not have an adequate self-evaluation mechanism. They can drive away committed workers who are not prepared to fight to get rid of them; they can dominate a field by keeping alive a memberless group and hence stop new organizations from developing; they can distort the public image of a group by claiming their own personal views as those of the group. Power-trippers often have a talent for getting media coverage and recognition by government officials.

It is interesting to note that many of the power-trippers who have hung on for a long time have been men. This may well relate to the fact that the poor people's movement is, for the most part, made up of women. When a man comes into a group there is often a tendency to elevate him to a position of power and to create a climate suitable for developing a power-tripper. In this sense, the problem of the male power-tripper is related to some of the same concerns that motivate the whole women's movement. Of course, not all men in groups are potential power-trippers, nor are all power-trippers men.

At its quarterly evaluations a group has to look for its own potential power-trippers. This is hardly to suggest that a witch-hunt is justified, but the problem should be recognized and guarded against. The group should guarantee that power and decision-making are not falling into the hands of one person. One of the best ways to prevent power-tripping is to have enough people in decision-making positions that they cannot develop. Even the active involvement of an executive of three or four can be sufficient to guard against this.

Each group has to find the right balance between protecting itself from power-trippers while still allowing good leadership to develop. The unjustified criticism of leaders which was discussed at the start of this section can often be an over-reaction to the fear that a leader is becoming a power-tripper. The group has to define for itself the fine line which divides unreasonable criticism from necessary safeguards.

4. Leadership Development

There is a need for a continual leadership development programme within any group. As an organization grows, more decision-making positions become necessary; some old leaders will be moving on to other things. There must always be a ready supply of people to fill any open leadership position. Also, there is an on-going need for members to develop attitudes which encourage working together, listening to each other, sharing ideas, and respecting each other's opinions. The members must learn to think and act as a group.

In spite of the large number of "leadership development programmes" offered by various agencies and professional organizations, real leadership development has to happen within the group. There is only a minimum value to the outside courses and programmes. Usually their content is not totally relevant to the situation of the group. Too often it is the same people who are going to these programmes and they are the ones who are already leaders in their own groups; the potential leaders who might benefit the most are frequently not the ones who attend.

One of the most useful methods which a group can use for its own leadership development is the "apprenticeship approach". Inexperienced members should be encouraged to accompany and observe experienced members in operation at meetings with government officials, talk-shows, speeches, etc. In this way, new members learn by seeing instead of by being told. Often the "apprentice" forgets his role as observer and becomes an active participant; he can take part when he is ready.

The apprenticeship approach is a natural extension of the idea of opening opportunities for advancement, discussed in the section on Membership. It allows more members to take part in the activities of the group, it lets people move at their own pace towards leadership positions, and it develops leadership skills.

Groups should consider using some of the audio-visual equipment which is now usually accessible throughout Canada. One of the most valuable of these is videotape. In one city the umbrella organization has kept a tape library on its major actions over the years; by examining these tapes it is possible for both old and new members to judge what was successful and what was not.

Groups should also keep in mind their own potential for organizing training programmes using experienced members as the resource people. One group, for example, is experimenting with a new system of "executive training" so members can learn how to run meetings, prepare minutes and agendas, keep books, etc. The group is negotiating with an outside organization to handle some parts of the programme which it does not feel it can adequately do by itself.

When a group does turn to an outside group to assist in some aspects of leadership development it is very important that the group define exactly the kind of training that is needed; then it can seek out the individuals or organizations that can best provide this training. The content of the training programme cannot be predetermined for the group; the group must decide what it wants and needs.

5. Relationship of the Group to Resource People and Professionals

There is hardly one group in Canada which has developed without some involvement with resource people and professionals, usually social workers or community organizers. Some groups seem to have an almost magnetic attraction for hordes of these professionals. Unless considerable care is taken to define the role of the professional and to structure a suitable relationship between him and the group, the results can be destructive. The group which makes the effort to define a proper relationship can derive great benefit from the skills of professionals while avoiding the problems.

It is the common experience of many groups that the relationship between professionals and the group is characterized by three phases:

First, there is dependence. The group looks to the professional to provide many of the answers. Sometimes actual (though not official) leadership comes to rest with the professionals whose "advice" is automatically accepted and followed.

Second, there is rejection. The group takes over the decision-making and leadership roles and repudiates the role which professionals have played. Frequently this phase can involve the exclusion of all professionals from the group; the group develops the philosophy that it can do everything by itself without any assistance from "outsiders".

Both the dependence and rejection phases can cover a wide range from mild to extreme. It usually happens that extreme rejection is an over-reaction to an initial over-dependence.

Third, there is acceptance on the group's own terms. The group realizes there are some things which it cannot possibly do by itself. There are certain kinds of professional skills which are absolutely necessary in some circumstances and it cannot be reasonably expected that they will be found in the group. The group also realizes that it can benefit from professional advice, even though it may not always choose to follow it. Some professionals have specialized experiences that can be valuable (for example, a position having access to inside information). The group acknowledges that it needs professionals, but it insists that the group, and not the professionals, will define the terms of their involvement. In this way, the group keeps control over its decision-making process (which is usually the objective of the second phase) while deriving the benefits of having professionals.

The first and second phases are dangers which the group must be aware of. In theory, of course, it would be easy to say that they should be avoided entirely. Realistically, avoiding them totally is rarely possible. It is natural for many groups to be somewhat dependent on professionals in their

early stages; it is equally natural for these same groups to reject this dependence as they mature. The key must be to avoid extremes in both phases. Chances of achieving this may be enhanced if the phase three sort of relationship is seen as the ultimate goal even if it is not immediately attainable.

If a new group is dependent on professionals, it must define for itself the depth of the dependence. Members should never assume that they are totally dependent; they must never let decision-making and leadership fall into the hands of the professionals. The group must figure out in what areas some dependence may be necessary and it must be prepared to work towards lessening that dependence.

The ability of the group to moderate its dependence during the first phase will assist it to avoid the dangers of extremes during the second phase. In many cases where there is a strong rejection of professionals after a period of substantial dependence, the group undergoes great internal stresses that may even lead to permanent damage. The group that can avoid the extremes of dependence may well be able to avoid the extremes of rejection.

Naturally much hinges on the personality, motives and skills of the professional. Professionals should be continually aware of the role which they are playing in the group. They have a responsibility to the group to minimize the dependence on them.

The phenomenon of the citizen "power-tripper" discussed earlier has a counterpart in the "professional power-tripper". There are some professionals who want to build dependence

and who then cling to all the power and control they can get. If one of these is allowed to proceed unchecked, the rejection phase (if it ever comes) will be extreme. A group has to be able to identify the potential professional power tripper just as it must identify the potential power tripping member; the same kinds of solutions as discussed previously must apply to the role of professionals. Above all, a group should be prepared to honestly examine the commitment and motivation of professionals and to evaluate their role.

In defining an ideal relationship between a group and professionals or resource people, a comparison might be made with someone using a library. A person does not go to a library and take the first book he sees. Instead he looks at what is on the shelf and selects the book that seems to meet his need. He keeps the book as long as he needs it and then he returns it to the library. The same kind of relationship should apply to a group's use of professionals and resource people. In any major Canadian city there are a very large number and variety of resource people available to a group. A group has to define what kind of resource it needs. Then it should shop around to find the person who is best able to play that role.

An important element which must be stressed is that resource people can cover a broad range of skills and occupations. In the early days of poor people's groups the term was used mainly for community workers and social workers. As groups expanded, the term grew to include lawyers and law students. Now, "resource person" can mean a whole variety of different specialized skills; it includes doctors, accountants, architects, reporters, photographers, educators, labour leaders, churchmen, politicians, and many others.

When the right resource person is found, the group has to remain in control of the situation. It must monitor the activities of the resource person to insure that he is doing the job which the group wants; if the resource person is moving into the wrong areas or is moving away from the group's control, it must be able to correct the situation. The group must decide when the resource person or professional is no longer needed. At all times the group is the boss.

In speaking of "shopping around" it is assumed that there will be a selection of resource people to choose from. In a large city this is usually the case. In smaller towns and rural locations the choice is often very limited. The group needing a lawyer, for example, may only have one or two available; it is forced to choose what is around or go without. In these cases established groups (especially those in urban centres) have a responsibility to provide resources. They should be available to assist new and rural groups to find the resources they need. Through this kind of cooperative effort it should be possible for groups anywhere to get proper resource people.

6. Effects of Funding

Funding is a necessary element in the development of a group. Everything from the postage stamps needed for a mailing announcing a meeting to paper for fliers costs money. An active organization needs money if it is going to grow.

This is particularly the case in poor people's organizations where members can rarely afford to spend their own money to participate. Simple items like transportation costs are usually taken for granted by more affluent persons when they consider becoming involved in an organization; in a poor people's group, however, the organization must often provide reimbursement for these costs if its members are to actively participate. A small amount of money can go a long way towards building membership by enabling participation.

While funding may solve many problems faced by a group, it can also generate many new ones. Groups must constantly be aware of these.

The first problem is a direct consequence of the "money enables participation" argument mentioned above. When there is no money it is clear that people participate because they want to; there is little question about the motivation of the people present. When money becomes available, there are invariably going to be some people who will only participate for the money; their commitment lasts as long as the money keeps coming in. Even among committed members, concern about "who's paying what" can often be heard. The group can be split as some suspect others of "ripping off" the organization.

Another problem created by funding arises when some members get paid to do a job while others do not. There is an obvious tendency for those not getting paid to stop working and to say that those who are getting a salary can do it all. In one example, a group had sixteen active welfare advocates,

all of whom were volunteers. The group received a grant that provided the salaries for only three advocates. Those who got paid stayed on; the others left. A real effort was made to get the unpaid volunteers to return to work; only a few responded. The results of salarizing some, but not all, the workers can lead to a reduction in the group's committed workers.

The effort to obtain funding can divert a group from its other objectives. Sometimes six or eight months can be spent trying to find money and during that period the other activities of the group can be neglected.

A similar problem can arise when a group tries to manage funding which it has suddenly received. This is particularly serious for groups which have received large grants for relatively short periods; in these cases much of the grant period can be spent simply adjusting to the money which is available. The group must suddenly confront problems which it has never considered and which may be quite beyond the experience of any of its members. And frequently by the time the group has adjusted and solved some of the problems, the funding has ended. It must then readjust to a lower level of funding (perhaps even to no funds at all) or again divert its efforts to seeking more funding.

The internal problems generated by funding do not lend themselves to easy solution. However, some suggestions seem clear:

- (a) Before it receives the money, the group must know exactly why it needs it. The group must analyze what the funding will enable it to do and what problems will be created. For some

of its needs, a group may discover that it would be better to go after an actual resource (such as paper or furniture) rather than money to buy the resource. If this is the case the group should not hesitate to do it.

- (b) It should ask for a realistic amount that it can manage. It should keep in mind that too much funding is often worse than not enough funding. For most groups the real need is for smaller grants over a longer period of time. Many sources of funds are possible including government, United Appeals, churches, unions and business. A group should do research to find out which source is best suited to its needs.
- (c) Before a group accepts funding it should clearly understand the terms of the grant. It should not be assumed that the funding source will have thought out all of its own terms; the experience of many groups with the Local Initiatives Program has demonstrated this. The group should carefully read and understand any document related to the grant and it should ask questions about anything that is not explicitly clear.
- (d) One of the most important resources to which a group receiving a grant should have access is an accountant. It is not reasonable to expect someone to be given responsibility for

the group's funds and become an instant bookkeeper. The treasurer has to have some professional assistance so he can perform his duties properly.

- (e) The group must develop within itself a method for making financial decisions.
The person responsible for the group's funds should administer policies, but should not be expected to make them. The method will vary from group to group according to their structure and needs, but it should always be well thought out and it should work.
- (f) The treasurer or bookkeeper, on his part, must always be realistic. He must be prepared to keep spending within the policy guidelines set by the group. He must be prepared to use his own judgement on those budget items that are vaguely defined (like incidental office expenses); this frequently means he has to be able to say no.

One last overriding question must be considered in relation to funding: How much independence does a group lose when it accepts funding from any source, particularly from government? Is it possible that a group will take money from the government and still press for basic social change?

The group must realize that any government programme can have a tremendous effect on its activities. This is particularly true when the money comes from the very part of the system (usually the welfare system) which the group is trying to change. Grants from such sources are acceptable only when the group can use the funds to pursue the goals which it has defined and when the group is able to maintain its independence, integrity, and structure. The group must be able to withstand extreme pressure, including the threat of losing its grant, when these are threatened.

This same question of whether the group's purpose and independence are threatened by accepting funding applies equally to funding from the private sector. Grants from charity appeals or other bodies can have the same sort of strings attached and be either as co-optive or liberating as those from government. Again, there is no constant answer. The group must recognize the question, weigh the arguments pro and con, and decide what it sees as being the right answer for itself.

SERVICES AND SOCIAL ACTION

Introduction

Virtually all the successful low-income groups in Canada offer some combination of services and social action. The services vary over a wide range and include such things as advocacy, information, day care, clothing depots and a host of others. By and large, services are what the group does for the individual; they are geared to take care of the immediate problems created by the present system. Social action, on the other hand, is what the group does with the individual; social action has no meaning outside the context of a group. Whether it takes the form of writing a brief, meeting with a minister, or demonstrating at the welfare department, social action is geared to bring about social change.

It is clear that a viable group should be involved in services and in social action. Individuals have to be helped to put up with the present and at the same time the present must not be perpetuated into the future. If it is to be engaged in service and social action, the group must confront some serious questions: What is the right balance between services and social action? What means can be used to bring about effective change? When should groups come together in pursuit of common objectives?

1. The Group and Services

The services of a group can perform any, or all, of three major functions:

First, to supplement the welfare system. Groups can offer services which are similar to those offered by traditional welfare agencies and which are intended to make up for the deficiencies of the services of these agencies. These might include free food, clothing depots, emergency referrals, etc.

Second, to assist individuals guarantee their rights under the welfare system and the other systems which affect poor people. This function is most clearly evident in welfare advocacy services which do more than simply supplement the welfare system but equip the recipient to fight for his rights under that system.

Third, to educate people about the reality of welfare and poverty. Some services are aimed at the total community and are intended to make people aware of the situation faced by the poor. Others are directed towards the membership of the group (as with welfare rights training programmes). Tied in as part of other services, the education function not only helps people live in the welfare system but heightens their awareness of the system, of poverty and of its causes.

Groups offer services for a variety of different reasons. The experience of many successful groups, however, shows there is usually one overriding objective: To lead people into social action by highlighting the failings of the present welfare system. Services should begin as a form of social action and they should remain as such. They should be seen as an attack on the inadequacies of the existing system, and primarily intended to change that system.

Naturally services will be set up in response to need. There will be individuals who will want only the service and who will not want any part of social action. No group can become so dehumanized as to ignore this kind of individual. But this should never be an excuse to abandon social action and to offer services only for their own sake.

To new persons coming to the group services can be an introduction to social action. Consider, for example, the role of services as a drawing-card which has already been discussed. The person who is attracted to the group because of its services should be helped to see that the individual problem he wants solved is related to the larger problem which the group is trying to solve. In this way the person who uses the service not only has his problem solved but is also shown a part he can play in social action. Any service can be used as an effective organizing tool if the group makes it into an organizing tool.

The greatest danger with services occurs when the social action objective is forgotten and the service is provided only for its own sake. At this point the service has become a mere band-aid. It has lost its whole intent and should not be continued without a thorough evaluation and redirection back to social action. Sometimes a group must be prepared to do away with a service if it no longer has a social action objective. An example of the approach of two groups to a clothing depot might be useful. In one, the depot was intended as a challenge to an established social agency that was supposed to be providing low-income families with inexpensive used clothes; the group thought services

provided by the agency were not adequate and decided to offer the same type of service themselves to highlight the agency's failure. It was clear to the membership why the group opened a clothing depot and the service element in the depot has been kept secondary to social action. Another group went into a clothing depot with objectives at best marginally related to social action; the group wanted to meet the real need of people for clothes but they made little analysis of the causes of the problem. The service took over the whole organization which soon abandoned its social action thrust.

When a group offers a service with the kind of non-social-action objectives as characterize most government and private agencies, it is lost. Instead of trying to force the system to improve, it is helping an inadequate system perpetuate itself by filling in a few gaps. The group is delaying the process of social change rather than speeding it up. It is giving government and the private agency sector an excuse for passing on responsibility which they should in fact be meeting.

When a group realizes that social action is no longer part of its services it should immediately re-examine its priorities. The process can be painful, but is absolutely necessary.

2. The Group and the Social Service System

Many, perhaps even most, of the social services offered by government and traditional private agencies are inadequate, misdirected, or outright irrelevant. In

the previous section it was argued that the group can expose the failings and irrelevancies through its own services. In a sense, the group forms a parallel system whose intent is to force the established system to change. Operating outside the existing social service system, the group can make the system responsive to needs.

However, it frequently happens that a group is given an opportunity to participate more directly in shaping the social service system. The opportunity might take the form of an invitation to sit on the Board of Directors of a private agency; or it might come about through legislation like Quebec's Bill 65 which established community-based multi-service centres across the province. Can the group effectively operate within the system and still bring about change in that system?

There is little value to a group adopting a rigid ideological position that any participation in the social service system is by its very nature wrong. There is no right or wrong answer that can be applied to every situation. If change can be brought about more quickly in some cases by working within the system rather than outside of it, why take the longer path? The same guidelines that applied to accepting funds must apply here: Can the group meet its objectives while maintaining its independence, integrity, and structure? The response must be realistic and practical; it should seek to protect the group's integrity while pursuing its objectives. In a word, the response must be pragmatic.

In a situation relating to membership on Boards of private agencies, the key must clearly be selectivity as to which agencies the group thinks are worth spending time and effort on. Many agencies may invite a group to appoint one or more representatives to their Board. The group should not accept every such invitation without careful thought. Some agencies may be so irrelevant that the group would be wasting its manpower; others might have such a bad image in the community that the group could be damaged through association with it. The group should select the agencies which it thinks are important for its own objectives.

Another important factor in deciding whether or not to participate on a Board is the question of numbers. Token representation is useless; unless a group can get representation which is substantial enough to make a difference, participation on Boards can be a frustrating and time-wasting exercise. The "adequacy" of a group's representation must be measured in terms of its ability to be effective in changing policies.

Consideration must be taken of the other members of the Board who could be possible allies. The chances of its representatives serving on the key committees which often formulate policy should also be assessed. In general, the experience has been that unless one-third of the Board is composed of "progressive" forces who are committed to change there is little chance of the representation being effective. There are, of course, always exceptions. It is possible that in some situations the Board is both important enough and potentially open enough that even one lone member can make a difference.

There is an obvious danger that a group can end up sitting on so many Boards that it has little time left for anything else. Boards are certainly time-consuming; what may start out as one meeting a month can grow as committees are formed. As stated before, a group has to be selective. If a Board is worth being represented on, individuals chosen by the group should be capable of effectively pursuing the group's objectives. There is little point in selecting individuals who cannot fight for the group's position simply to spread around the jobs.

The problems raised by legislation like Quebec's Bill 65 are much more complex. The stated intent of the legislation is to reorganize the social service and health systems in the province. Part of this reorganization includes the integration of certain of the services offered by citizens' groups into an overall scheme. There are several benefits: citizen participation is stressed; overlaps and gaps in services may be reduced; uniform standards of services may be established. However, the group which has the option of participating in such an integrated multi-service centre must again face the thorny question of how much independence it loses by doing so.

Faced with the possibility of integration into the social service system, the group must retain the power to make its own decisions. It must demand guarantees that control remains with the citizens. The group should use the system instead of letting the system use the group.

Some groups in Quebec have chosen to participate in the centres established under Bill 65; others have stayed out. There is no simple right or wrong position. The decision must depend on the nature of the group, its activities, the local centre, and the centre's board. The group must make the choice of integrating or staying separate.

3. The Group and Social Change

When a group takes action its objective is to get something done about a problem. It should always start by clearly defining the problem and its objective in tackling the problem. To seek change alone is meaningless. What change? There can be change for the worse as well as for the better. Once the objective has been clearly defined, then tactics become critical. The wrong tactic can rally the opposition and turn public opinion against an objective which might have won broad public support.

There is a real danger when any particular tactic or form of social action becomes the "in-thing". Groups feel a pressure to use the high-status tactic without regard for its effectiveness. Rational consideration for what is best in the situation gets lost. The result can be wasted effort, a lost issue, or even permanent set-backs.

For a period in the poor people's movement confrontation was viewed by some as a cure-all. Irrespective of the issue or situation, the answer was to confront. It may well be that in some circumstances confrontation is the most effective solution, but it is hardly appropriate to all situations. Most of the early groups that indiscriminately turned to confrontation without regard to its appropriateness

no longer exist; their sole reliance on confrontation was a major factor in their demise. When a group turns to confrontation, it should keep clearly in mind that confrontation is only one means to an end and not an end in itself.

Another tactic which enjoyed a period of favour was resort to the courts. When an issue arose, the group was urged to take legal action. Court decisions can be invaluable in establishing precedents, but precedents can be in opposition to the group's objectives as well as supportive of them. There is no point in going to court if the case cannot be won.

As groups have gained experience, it has become clear that no one tactic works in every situation. The type of social action must depend on the particular circumstances.

As a rule of thumb, it could be said that a group should use as little energy as necessary to accomplish its objectives. If a letter or a brief will work, it should be used. If a meeting with an official seems likely to get results, the group should meet. There is no point to wasting the time and energy of organizing a demonstration if an easier method is available.

In some circumstances a group may decide to use the regular channels of briefs and meetings before resorting to demonstrations and confrontation. They may feel from the beginning that confrontation is the only real solution

but recourse to the regular channels first may give legitimacy to the need for demonstration. Perhaps only the threat of confrontation is necessary.

There is not one particular strategy or tactic that is best for every circumstance. Groups have to be able to use a variety of tactics and strategies that are geared to particular situations; they must have an awareness of what factors other than their own actions will be affecting the situation. In short, groups must develop a real sophistication that allows them to deal effectively with different circumstances.

The cornerstone of this sophistication is social and political education, the ability to gain access to information, and the ability to use the information. The group has to learn how the system works, particularly the political system. In any situation it should know who is the right person to see. It should know when to use government officials and employees for the information they can provide. It should know how to protect its sources of information. It should know when it has a piece of information that is really valuable or useful.

In some circumstances the group should be willing to form pragmatic alliances with those who may be pursuing a common objective even if for a radically different reason. The danger in such alliances must be carefully measured, but it can occur that such an alliance around a specific issue is the fastest means of realizing a goal. If the tactic works and the group can maintain its integrity, why not use it?

The most crucial forum for these alliances is in regards to proposed legislation. Groups often adopt a rigid position of criticism and opposition in response to any government proposal. Whether or not the proposal represents an advance towards their objectives, the advance is rarely far enough and the group stands in total opposition. This is frequently done on the assumption that the proposal will pass anyway and that by holding out it may force the government to give more. In some circumstances this may work. In others, it plays directly into the hands of those who oppose any progressive change. While the group denounces the proposal and demands more, others are quietly at work diluting or eliminating what progressive aspects there were in the bill.

Groups must learn to assess when it is in their best interests to support government legislation which offers them modest gains. There are situations when the support of groups can be a crucial factor in passing a bill, saving it from amendments that would remove its most progressive features or winning amendments which make it more acceptable. Blanket denunciations can do none of these.

Groups must develop a political sophistication as great as that of those fighting to maintain the status quo if they are to be effective in influencing the legislative process. In some situations support may be as useful a tactic as criticism is in others; a group should be willing to use it.

4. The Group and Other Groups

No single group can hope to deal with all the problems faced by the poor people of a city or province. The problems are too numerous while the manpower and resources of a group are generally too limited. To be effective a group has to focus its activities on a specific area; it has to know its limitations and avoid spreading itself too thin. The group that tries to do everything itself will probably end up doing nothing well.

Rather than try to accomplish everything by itself, a group should seek to develop working relationships with other low-income organizations. These relationships may lead to various forms of association including city-wide and province-wide umbrella organizations which can deal more effectively with major issues on a broad front.

An umbrella organization should maintain the identity and integrity of each participating group. It should not be the simple combination of many groups into one large group, nor should it be a substitute for local groups. Rather, the umbrella should be a forum where diverse groups with common goals and objectives can come together, share information, and map strategies around common aims.

The benefits which can be derived from an umbrella organization are numerous. Some of the most significant are:

- (a) Coordination: The activities of many groups can be directed in an orderly way towards a common objective. Rather than random efforts from scattered groups, concerted thrusts around major issues become possible. Groups working together are a much more formidable front than many diverse attempts. The importance of "people power" cannot be forgotten. Many issues are too large for one group to handle; groups must work together for success.

- (b) Information: Umbrella organizations allow the flow of information among groups. This information can take several forms: It can be one group sharing its experiences, successes and failures with others so the same mistakes are not repeated. It can be a group knowing when to send an individual with a problem to another group that specializes in that issue. It can be a group alerting others to issues that it has uncovered. In any area, information-sharing among groups benefits everyone. This is particularly true for groups in rural areas which may be information-starved, but it can also be true for groups in different parts of the same large city.

- (c) Resources: The responsibility of established groups to assist new and rural groups find resources has already been discussed. An umbrella organization can make this process possible. Groups can share the resources they have so everyone derives the maximum benefit. Umbrella organizations can also make

available some resources which no individual group could afford; these might include secretarial services, printing equipment, accountants' services, etc.

- (d) Funding: In at least two cities local groups have been able to obtain funding because of their participation in an umbrella organization. The umbrella has obtained substantial grants for the total organization; it then gives each member group a monthly budget which the group may spend as it wishes. A uniform bookkeeping system is used by all groups to simplify the accounting. Monthly budgets are required to substantiate continued need for funding.
- (e) Representation: Persons in remote rural areas are at a severe disadvantage in making their concerns heard and in obtaining support for matters vital to them. A provincial umbrella organization lessens this problem. As well, by involving people from rural regions it enables urban groups to gain a more balanced view.
- (f) Order among Groups: In the absence of an umbrella organization groups pursuing similar objectives can engage in pointless competition or even work at cross-purposes for lack of a means for exchanging information and settling differences.

- (g) Organization: The existence of an umbrella can give individuals the support they need to start new groups in unorganized areas. It can also motivate further organization by helping existing groups in a community to identify problems that none of them are presently dealing with and lead to the decision to organize new groups to concentrate on these problems.

The formation of an umbrella organization can frequently be a difficult task. On a provincial level distance can be a major factor; the expense of travelling and the difficulties of communication must be overcome. On a city-wide level, groups often fear they will lose some of their independence. In forming the umbrella it becomes important that the groups be provided with something which they need, which they might not otherwise have, and which does not threaten their independence. An example might be a central secretarial and accounting service or other such "resource bank" available to all low-income groups in a city. It would be hoped that as groups use this service and see the advantages of cooperation the role of the umbrella organization would expand into more substantive activities.

In discussing umbrella organizations it has been assumed that all of the participants will be low-income groups. This is usually a requirement if the umbrella is to be really effective. It is necessary that the participants have common goals and objectives if there is to be a long-term (and hopefully permanent) working

relationship. However on some issues the group may want the support of other kinds of organizations, for example, unions, churches, etc. Such groups can frequently be a significant resource around specific issues. It is generally agreed that such organizations should not be brought into the umbrella as this would hopelessly diffuse its focus and change its character. Rather, the umbrella should seek to form short-term alliances around these specific issues. Such alliances have been successful in many cases and have served the purposes of all the organizations involved.

The crucial element in alliances is that they should be entered into when needed. A group should not spend a great deal of energy entering into alliances for their own sake. Alliances are only a means for accomplishing some objectives.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the seminar, and this report which grew out of it, are only a beginning to finding answers to the many problems which have been faced by groups across Canada. A great many problems remain and groups will have to continue to work towards solutions that are right for their own circumstances. The job is unquestionably a difficult one. But the imaginative and creative efforts which groups have already made demonstrate that problems can be solved, that issues can be won and that groups can succeed in bringing about positive social change.

Hopefully, this report will be a small contribution towards making that job easier. Obviously it does not provide all the answers - perhaps it raises more questions than answers. But at least it can be a starting point for discussion and further analysis. And if one objective of the seminar were singled out as the most important, it would be just this: to open up discussion within, and between groups; to enable groups to share some of the experience which they have gained; to help groups become aware of some of the pit-falls which others have encountered; to provide groups with information which can help them formulate their own solutions.

Some groups may wish to conduct their own seminars to examine their own experience. Others have already suggested that provincial or regional seminars would be valuable. Whatever the forum a group selects, the fact that discussion and sharing is going on is paramount. It is through this process of discussion, sharing, and evaluating that groups will grow stronger.

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